REVIEW ARTICLE
A Century in the Life of Spain.

Javier Fernández Sebastián and Juan Francisco Fuentes (eds.) 2008.
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I

When reading standard histories of Spain's twentieth century one gets almost invariably the same uncomfortable impression. On the one hand, it seems as if the history of modern Spain stopped at the end of the Civil War in 1939 and resumed after 1976 upon the retrieval of democracy. On the other hand, it is hard to fit in such reductive reading with a country where, for example, one of the trends of liberalism originated at the beginning of the 1800s; or where a fascinating, though finally tragic, battle of ideologies took place during the first decades of the following century.

For about four decades Spain remained partly isolated from the rest of Europe and the fact of not being a comparable country heavily conditioned its role in international politics. It did not help much either that its relations with Latin American countries were established mostly with homologous authoritarian regimes. But the years of diplomatic isolation were not identical in intensity. They testify to

a gradual *apertura* and a growing search for cooperation and help. Under the dictatorship the country remained as politicised as it had been in times of freedom. The difference of course lay in the public use of liberties. Most freedoms were exercised clandestinely and this had the ambivalent effect of educating politically while nurturing a reactive behaviour that only the passage of generations has reversed. Repressed as they had been for almost forty years, the conquest of democracy saw the public and private liberties spread enthusiastically.

In matters of weeks Spain looked a different country, marvelously rejuvenated, its public spaces reoccupied by the people, its diplomatic machinery working at full speed. So passionate were the dreams of freedom that the civic energies lasted longer than expected, years indeed, although the economic and political transformations took a much longer pace to secure, and many pains to suffer. The moment of history arrived of late, but to stay. It entered the political scene in a nonnegotiable way. Every account of the recent past and its origins was submitted to scrutiny. Thankfully that trend has stimulated the flourishing of historical and historiographic research as never before and the *Diccionario* under review is but its most eminent proof.

Yet the writing of history restored an inveterate frailty: the tendency to interpret the past in adversarial terms, as a drama of insoluble confrontations. But the history of the winners versus the history of the losers contest, even though imaginary, has served traditionally a paradoxical purpose: to keep interpretations open assuming the impossibility of saying a last word on the past, but taking historical interpretation to the least peaceful domain. In some cases, it has even distorted the mere possibility of historical understanding. For example, the view on the sixteenth-century Inquisition. Next to the propaganda by religious and political European rivals of the time, the accumulated sense of guiltiness made Spanish historians almost incapable of looking at that period with some distance and fairness, as Henry Kamen has convincingly documented.[1]

II

If history is considered a drama, it becomes very difficult for historians to watch it as impartial spectators, although not impossible. But this was a singular kind of drama where history had been assigned

to play an adjudicating role between contending parts. Leaving aside the question of why should always be irreconcilable enemies, winners and losers, good and bad citizens, it is no surprise that this tormented way of coming to terms with the past has become a historiographic constant.

Some antecedents go back further in time. The title of one of the best books on the idea of Spain in the nineteenth century, by historian José Álvarez Junco, reads *Mater dolorosa*.[2] The idea of Spain has been essentialised, personified, sublimated, idealised and reconceptualised so many times and in so many forms that if something remains after all is a trace of endless and fierce disputes on the meaning of a painful country. Another book by historian Santos Juliá brilliantly recalls the countless motives of this conflict of views. Its title, *Historias de las dos Españas* (Histories of the two Spains),[3] is a metaphor of the confrontational style in interpreting the past: Catholics against liberals, liberals against conservatives, socialists against liberals, fascists against anarchists, left against right (whatever they might mean), all vying for representing the true spirit of patriotism.

Both views, argues Juliá, grow as "opposite rhetorics" that need each other to keep the idea of Spain alive as a problem, as a consuming intellectual invention that pervades all spheres of social and political life. To judge by the unceasing self-questioning of Spain's legacy, the writing of national history mostly describes an enduring exercise in self-inflicted derogation that lasts to our times. But most of all, the invention of Spain as a problem instils history with an engaging purpose aimed at avoiding all hope for unity, for synthesis.

Understandably, the loss of Cuba and the Philippines in 1898 was the end to the tale of the "emperor's new clothes" and the beginning of the consolidation of other hegemonic empires. Suddenly the image of Spain adjusted to a sombre reality. From a downgraded empire to international defeat, the new situation of Spain was perceived as both a political misfortune and a moral disaster. Intellectuals and politicians alike initiated a kind of introspective search for the decline's causes, which inspired a general debate on the mission and significance of Spain in the nascent century.

1898 became synonymous with crisis and its consequences endured for several decades. But pessimism was continuously counterbalanced by the optimism of, for example, regenerationists (visionary social scientists convinced of the transformative power of education

and the law) as well as liberal and progressive thinkers and politicians. The latter took the crisis as a chance for modernizing the country. Their achievements were extraordinary though short-lived. As Stanley Paine has recalled, "In terms of civic culture, literacy rates, and economic development, it might be judged that Spain in 1931 was approximately at the level of Britain and France toward the end of the nineteenth century." Yet neither the political reshaping nor the social and cultures changes were sufficiently consolidated.[4]

III

The *Diccionario* captures this paramount crossroads vividly. And it does it in a novel way. By providing a historically complex overview, it de-dramatises conventional narratives of the rise and fall of the Spanish empire. But, most of all, it refutes the myth of the exceptionalism of Spain by conveying its modernity along with other European countries. *The Diccionario político y social del siglo XX español* (Political and social dictionary of the Spanish twentieth century), edited by historians Javier Fernández Sebastián and Juan Francisco Fuentes, is a *begriffsgeschichtliche* lexicon. The companion to a previous dictionary on the nineteenth century,[5] whose size almost doubles, it perfects the method and provides a richer view of the epoch.

History is explored through the life of concepts. The articles picture their semantic itineraries over the hundred years period while presenting them not in isolation but interwoven into their semantic networks. If the reader begins by "Anarquismo", it takes her afterwards to articles like "Campesino" (Peasant), "Clase obrera" (Working class), "Comunista", "Cuestión social" (Social question), "Huelga" (Strike), "Izquierda" (Left), "Masas", "Movimiento obrero" (Workers' movement), "Proletariado" (Proletariat), "Revolución", "Sindicato" (Trade union), "Socialista" or "Utopía". The cross-references expand the meanings of concepts and ideas but at the same time afford a panoramic historical analysis of social and political events. It is certainly in this and in other cases a kind of Impressionistic survey, but both the historicity of politics and the diachronic reconstruction of contexts (economic, social, cultural) are fairly achieved and successfully compete with individual in-depth monographs.

A representative example, and moreover an exemplary case, is the article "Europa", which eloquently portrays the phases of rapprochement to and separation from Europe over the century. If in the early 1900s Spain is seen as a problem, Europe is envisaged as the solution. What Western Europe represented, namely scientific, cultural and political modernity, soon became a political and social ideal, the most cherished source of recognition. Normalized relations with the rest of European countries lasted until the 1930s. The Civil War uncovered, though, unexpected, disquieting sides of European diplomacy. Still today, thanks to ongoing archival research, controversies abound as to which country cooperated or not with the constitutional government or with the rebels.[6]

Yet, it was the launching of the project of a united Europe in the 1950s that attracted a renovated interest towards European integration. From the next decade onwards Spain began to act as a potential partner to the project, which means that transition to democracy rested on earlier antecedents.[7] Belonging to the Council of Europe in 1977 became a first recognition of promising changes in the law concerning human rights. Most important, as is has been the case with all new members since, it paved the way for its entrance in the European Economic Community in 1986.

Semantic continuities and ruptures, blends and oppositions provide a historical view alternative to both grand narratives and disconnected interpretations. But the attention to conceptual history is combined with other research methods, most notably with the study of the linguistic uses by historical agents. The dictionary team has gathered the most varied materials from archives to newspapers to parliamentary proceedings to literary and scientific works. Many of them are of minor importance if taken singularly, but together they produce an absorbing account of a period traditionally explained largely through major events and canonical works.

IV

This is one of the novelties of the dictionary. Secondary and neglected sources enhance history writing by raising the interest on unexplored circumstances, affairs and intellectual debates. They can even challenge past views and, certainly, as the editors argue, their knowledge

becomes an antidote to extended prejudices. Dictionaries are always mentioned, only to right away survey the multiple routes of semantic changes. Contexts are then recreated as pragmatic contexts. Usually in chronological order, but also sometimes authors embark on uneven journeys through time in order to discover the movement of concepts and the ways agents use them to grasp and to represent reality.

Article "Historia" is a good case in reflection on the ever presence of the past, on the continuing revaluation of received views and, likewise, on the indispensability of historical intelligence to understand the present. It deals with the practice of professional history as developed in the academia from positivist to historicist to Marxist and structuralist positions, to name but some of the most salient isms, before an overall revision was carried out upon the retrieval of democracy. The "new history" has since imbued *le métier de l'historien* with a sense of scientificness well far away from the end-of-the-nineteenth-century scientific spirit: less visionary and prejudiced while more mindful of the contingency in the demarcation of disciplines.[8]

There are other methodological articles, like "Ideología" and "Política", but the keys to the research are in the Introduction. More than a mere vindication of conceptual history, Fernández Sebastián and Fuentes argue for the opening of an internal debate in the discipline. Self-criticism should not necessarily reissue phantoms of the past, it should not lead to a renewed confrontation between revisionists and traditionalists. By discussing the general epistemological assumptions in the practice of history the debate should lead, so they claim, to the renovation of methods in the discipline.

"[T]he conscience of the historicity of concepts," write the editors, "should help us build little by little a more reflexive and less dogmatic historiography, that is, less ideologically conditioned and more open to both critical debate and the questioning of its own limits and foundations." (Introduction, 37) Such programmatic statement further aims to both the articulation among different research methodologies and, moreover, the contribution to a novel comparative perspective.

Crossing national frontiers in terms of history writing means facing the many challenges of meeting national traditions and historiographies but, likewise, it leads to the central issue of communicating and translating languages. The dictionary builds on the work of the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, but its inspiration is free and broader. The project becomes meaningful within the Europe-wide context of his-

toriographical renovation of the last few decades. Although different national conceptual histories had been in the making, it has been the initiative of the History of Political and Social Concepts Group since 1998 the main source of inspiration for a new cooperative programme, one of whose aspirations is to perform the project of a European conceptual history.

Yet the dictionary also connects with another international project, Iberconceptos that surveys the histories of conceptual innovation in the Iberian-American world. The complexity of the resulting semantic maps is akin to the European conceptual landscape, the only simplifying factor being the existence of just two major languages, Portuguese and Spanish. In either case the task ahead is huge but the envisioned outcomes deserve the work initiated by both comparative enterprises. Clearly they are changing the practice of history and thus advancing innovative ways of interpreting the past.

V

If anything can be said of the dictionary is that it spares no effort in scrutinizing all possible angles to give a colourful and vibrant image of the history of twentieth-century Spain. It dismantles univocal and assumedly definitive views and so invites the reader to keep searching and comparing historical accounts. The net of articles interweaves overlooked aspects with prominent details in the many itineraries that the combination of contents and words permits. No doubt the variety of research materials explains such results, but also especially relevant to this effect is the attention paid to rhetoric, namely to the changes in official and unofficial forms of rhetoric to describe each historical moment.

In some cases even though the intent is otherwise, the choral reading gives the impression of an emancipatory account. Beginning by article "Ciudadanía" (Citizenship), the following steps could be "Igualdad" (Equality), "Libertad" and "Mujer" (Woman). But also of related interest are articles "Derechos" (Rights) and "Educación". The conquest of equality is presented in contrasted ways, never as a teleological mission but as a precarious intergenerational legacy that reaches our own days. And this gives the precise meaning of an uncertain process, devoid of any moralizing message, that can only be rendered from coordinated views.

If we take instead "Liberal", "Liberalismo", "Política", "Progreso" and "Derechos", the impression is of an extraordinarily politicised century. An overall picture is impossible to condense under simple headings, needless to say under conventional mottos like the century of the intellectuals. The dictionary resists analogous reductions and succeeds in presenting the complexity of social and political debates. Their plurality becomes apparent in the changes of political rhetoric. The language of politics uncovers a nuanced history of political battles fought from the trenches of parliaments, newspapers, academic publications, artistic movements and cultural works: all seen from the outside, no matter the political allegiances, as an engaging cause.

Articles like "Cultura", "Modernidad" or "Periodismo" (Journalism) portray some of the most intriguing changes in the mood of the country, which was modern but lost its modernity to later retrieve its best legacy and somehow reinvent itself – an itinerary, by the way, followed by many other European countries during the twentieth century.[9] The changes account for the hectic activity of its public life, for its international relations beyond diplomacy and for the efforts to keep it alive in dark times. Most of all, they make visible the enduring inheritance of unfinished projects and so invite the reader to continually keep in mind the historical perspective.

Political and constitutional changes are surveyed in the articles "Autonomía", "Constitución", "Democracia", "Estado" and "Regionalismo". Unlike France, Spain is not properly a centralised country, indeed it is a federal or federal-like country, but shares many administrative features with its neighbour. The articles account for the search of formulas to restructure the state and create decentralised government institutions and procedures. It has become an incessant search submitted to all kinds of electoral negotiations over the years. At the dawn of the twenty-first century many of the achieved balances and accords, like the broad agreements that made possible the arrival of democracy in the 1970s, seem to be at risk. The series of articles on nationalism give a fair explanation of such difficult circumstances. Imaginative as they are, the constitutional agreements are probably the most fragile of all.

The dictionary excels in recreating public debates, some of them running through the century, like the one on modernity; some others of shorter life though no less intense, like the debates on censorship or secularization; and others interrupted and retrieved at different mo-

ments, like the one on democracy. The numerous debates also attest to the growing interdependence of Spain over the century. This is mostly shown by its Europeanisation.

Yet there are other significant aspects of this process that come out only fragmentarily reported. Spain's linkages with Latin American countries is but one of the major areas of its cultural and international relations. Article "Hispanidad" covers a minor part of that web of exchanges and article "Emigración" gives clues to understand the successive waves of emigration. Less information is given on the relations with the Maghreb countries, which for historical reasons account for the third main area of international cooperation.

What diplomacy has only awkwardly accomplished, commercial, cultural and educative cooperation has achieved over decades of slow but firm efforts. Most of all, the transformation of Spain since the last two decades of the twentieth century owes a great deal to immigration from Latin American and African countries. Spain is a quite different country, younger indeed and perceived as a home to opportunities at the beginning of the new century thanks to those exchanges and thanks to immigration.

As the editors point out in the Introduction, many old concepts have proved unable to catch up with the vertiginous pace of social and political changes. But that is not an insurmountable difficulty. The fundamental problem may not lie in the concepts themselves but in the way we operate with them. We use concepts to describe reality, to interpret the past and to argumentatively anticipate the future. We use concepts rhetorically whenever we argue. They are not fixed but changing semantic and epistemological references and no matter their literality, their true meaning lies in the arguments we build.

"A dictionary is never finished," acknowledge the editors. The Introduction compensates some lacks in the already long table of contents but identify the need of further research "into a conceptual history of the present." All things considered, especially when compared with other available histories, to explore the twentieth century in the life of Spain, this is undoubtedly the best resource.

NOTES

1. Henry Kamen, *The Spanish Inquisition: A Historical Revision*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1997, esp. ch. 14, "Inventing the Inquisition", 305-20.
2. José Álvarez Junco, *Mater dolorosa. La idea de España en el siglo XIX*. Madrid: Taurus, 2001.
3. Santos Juliá, *Historias de las dos Españas*. Madrid: Taurus, 2004.
4. Stanley G. Payne, *The Collapse of the Spanish Republic, 1933-1936: Origins of the Civil War*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006, 10.
5. Javier Fernández Sebastián and Juan Francisco Fuentes, dirs., *Diccionario político y social del siglo XIX español*. Madrid: Alianza, 2002.
6. See for example Ángel Viñas's massive trilogy on the Spanish Second Republic's international relations holding the thesis of a double hunting: the hostility by fascist governments and the abandonment by presumed allies: *La soledad de la República. El abandono de las democracias y el viraje hacia la Unión Soviética* (Barcelona: Crítica, 2006), *El escudo de la República. El oro de España, la apuesta soviética y los hechos de mayo de 1937* (Barcelona: Crítica, 2007) and *El honor de la República. Entre el acoso fascista, la hostilidad británica y la política de Stalin* (Barcelona: Crítica, 2008).
7. Two pioneer accounts from the fields of comparative sociology and political science made visible the series of changes that preceded the transition to democracy. They contributed to a new intelligibility of the recent past and their comparative approach underlined the similarities with countries like Italy, Greece, Portugal and Turkey: Salvador Giner, "Political Economy, Legitimation, and the State in Southern Europe", and José María Maravall and Julián Santamaría, "Political Change in Spain and the Prospects for Democracy", in Guillermo O'Donnell, Philippe C. Schmitter, and Laurence Whitehead, eds., *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Southern Europe.* Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986, 11-44 and 71-108 respectively.
8. A brilliant discussion of this issue, with particular emphasis on the artificial separation of art (style) from science (history), is Peter Gay's *Style in History*. New York: Basic Books, 1974, 185-217.
9. See for example the half of the century account by Tony Judt, especially his chapter "The Varieties of Europe" in *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945*. New York: The Penguin Press, 2005, 749-76.